

Counties Want All Questar Customers to Pay

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) -- Natural-gas bills are higher for some Questar Gas customers in five Utah counties. Now there's a plan to share the pain.

Local officials and a state agency are proposing that all customers pay an extra 19 cents per month, or \$2.28 per year, to reimburse Questar for extending service into Beaver, Millard, Iron, Washington and Emery counties.

For 12 years, many residents in those counties have been paying an additional \$16 to \$30 a month. Beaver County officials said it's too much to bear alone.

"Two years ago, we tried to recruit a paper-recycling company into locating here, but as soon as they found out about the surcharge, they said they'd go elsewhere," said Rob Adams of the Beaver County Economic Development Corp.

"We're seeing unprecedented economic growth along the Wasatch Front, but because of our natural-gas rates, we're being left out," he said.

Questar supports the effort to spread the monthly charge, spokesman Chad Jones said. The Utah Division of Public Utilities endorses it, too.

"We're definitely in favor of economic development in rural counties," said Connie White, division director.

Her agency is charged with representing the interests of utilities and their customers in cases before the Utah Public Service Commission, which sets rates.

A watchdog group, the Committee of Consumer Services, isn't sure it's a good idea. The group believes it would be better if Questar's shareholders and others absorbed the cost. It argues that all customers should not cover the company's risk of expanding into those areas.

Adams said the extra charge wouldn't be much of a burden. "All we really want is a level playing field when it comes to competing for jobs with other communities in Utah," he said.

----- Information from: The Salt Lake Tribune, <http://www.sltrib.com>

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